

A LETTER TO A YOUNG CLERGYMAN,
LATELY ENTERED INTO HOLY
ORDERS

Dublin, *January the 9th, 1719-20.*

SIR,

ALTHOUGH it was against my knowledge or advice, that you entered into holy orders, under the present dispositions of mankind toward the Church, yet since it is now supposed too late to recede, (at least according to the general practice and opinion,) I cannot forbear offering my thoughts to you upon this new condition of life you are engaged in.

I could heartily wish that the circumstances of your fortune, had enabled you to have continued some years longer in the university; at least till you were ten years standing; to have laid in a competent stock of human learning, and some knowledge in divinity, before you attempted to appear in the world: For I cannot but lament the common course, which at least nine in ten of those who enter into the ministry are obliged to run. When they have taken a degree, and are consequently grown a burden to their friends, who now think themselves fully discharged, they get into orders as soon as they can; (upon which I shall make no remarks,) first solicit a readership, and if they be very fortunate, arrive in time to a curacy here in town, or else are sent to be assistants in the country, where they probably continue several years, (many of them their whole lives,) with thirty or forty pounds a-year for their support, till some bishop, who happens to be not overstocked with relations, or attached to favourites, or is content to supply his diocese without colonies from England, bestows upon them some inconsiderable benefice, when it is

odds they are already encumbered with a numerous family. I should be glad to know what intervals of life such persons can possibly set apart for the improvement of their minds ; or which way they could be furnished with books, the library they brought with them from their college being usually not the most numerous, or judiciously chosen. If such gentlemen arrive to be great scholars, it must, I think, be either by means supernatural, or by a method altogether out of any road yet known to the learned. But I conceive the fact directly otherwise, and that many of them lose the greatest part of the small pittance they receive at the university.

I take it for granted, that you intend to pursue the beaten track, and are already desirous to be seen in a pulpit, only I hope you will think it proper to pass your quarantine among some of the desolate churches five miles round this town, where you may at least learn to read and to speak before you venture to expose your parts in a city congregation ; not that these are better judges, but because, if a man must needs expose his folly, it is more safe and discreet to do so before few witnesses, and in a scattered neighbourhood. And you will do well if you can prevail upon some intimate and judicious friend to be your constant hearer, and allow him with the utmost freedom to give you notice of whatever he shall find amiss either in your voice or gesture ; for want of which early warning, many clergymen continue defective, and sometimes ridiculous, to the end of their lives ; neither is it rare to observe among excellent and learned divines, a certain ungracious manner, or an unhappy tone of voice, which they never have been able to shake off.

I should likewise have been glad, if you had applied yourself a little more to the study of the English language, than I fear you have done ; the neglect whereof is one of the most general defects among the scholars of this kingdom, who seem not to have the least conception of a style, but run on in a flat kind of phraseology, often mingled with barbarous terms and expressions, peculiar to the nation : Neither do I perceive that any person, either finds or acknowledges his wants upon this head, or in the least desires to have them supplied. Proper words in proper

places, make the true definition of a style. But this would require too ample a disquisition to be now dwelt on: however, I shall venture to name one or two faults, which are easy to be remedied, with a very small portion of abilities.

The first is the frequent use of obscure terms, which by the women are called hard words, and by the better sort of vulgar, fine language; than which I do not know a more universal, inexcusable, and unnecessary mistake, among the clergy of all distinctions, but especially the younger practitioners. I have been curious enough to take a list of several hundred words in a sermon of a new beginner, which not one of his hearers among a hundred could possibly understand, neither can I easily call to mind any clergyman of my own acquaintance who is wholly exempt from this error, although many of them agree with me in the dislike of the thing. But I am apt to put myself in the place of the vulgar, and think many words difficult or obscure, which they will not allow to be so, because those words are obvious to scholars. I believe the method observed by the famous Lord Falkland¹ in some of his writings, would not be an ill one for young divines: I was assured by an old person of quality who knew him well, that when he doubted whether a word was perfectly intelligible or no, he used to consult one of his lady's chambermaids, (not the waiting-woman, because it was possible she might be conversant in romances,) and by her judgment was guided whether to receive or reject it. And if that great person thought such a caution necessary in treatises offered to the learned world, it will be sure at least as proper in sermons, where the meanest hearer is supposed to be concerned, and where very often a lady's chambermaid may be allowed to

¹ Lucius Cary, second Viscount Falkland (1610-1643), who was killed at the battle of Newbury in the great Civil War, was a generous patron of learning and of the literary men of his day. He was himself a fine scholar and able writer. Clarendon has recorded his character in the seventh book of his "History of the Great Rebellion": "A person of such prodigious parts of learning and knowledge, of that inimitable sweetness and delight in conversation, of so flowing and obliging an humanity and goodness to mankind, that, if there were no other brand upon this odious and accursed Civil War than that single loss, it must be infamous and execrable to all posterity." Falkland has been made the hero of a romance by Lord Lytton. [T. S.]

equal half the congregation, both as to quality and understanding. But I know not how it comes to pass, that professors in most arts and sciences are generally the worst qualified to explain their meanings to those who are not of their tribe : a common farmer shall make you understand in three words, that his foot is out of joint, or his collar-bone broken, wherein a surgeon, after a hundred terms of art, if you are not a scholar, shall leave you to seek. It is frequently the same case in law, physic, and even many of the meaner arts.

And upon this account it is, that among hard words, I number likewise those which are peculiar to divinity as it is a science, because I have observed several clergymen, otherwise little fond of obscure terms, yet in their sermons very liberal of those which they find in ecclesiastical writers, as if it were our duty to understand them ; which I am sure it is not. And I defy the greatest divine to produce any law either of God or man, which obliges me to comprehend the meaning of *omniscience*, *omnipresence*, *ubiquity*, *attribute*, *beatific vision*, with a thousand others so frequent in pulpits, any more than that of *eccentric*, *idiosyncrasy*, *entity*, and the like. I believe I may venture to insist farther, that many terms used in Holy Writ, particularly by St Paul, might with more discretion be changed into plainer speech, except when they are introduced as part of a quotation.¹

I am the more earnest in this matter, because it is a general complaint, and the justest in the world. For a divine has nothing to say to the wisest congregation of any parish in this kingdom, which he may not express in a manner to be understood by the meanest among them. And this assertion must be true, or else God requires from us more than we are able to perform. However, not to contend whether a logician might possibly put a case that would serve for an exception, I will appeal to any man of letters, whether at least nineteen in twenty of those perplexing words might not be changed into easy ones, such as naturally first occur to ordinary men, and probably did so

¹ Swift refers to this point in his "Thoughts on Religion," and regrets that the explanation of matters of doctrine, which St. Paul expressed in the current eastern vocabulary, should have been perpetuated in terms founded on the same terminology. [T. S.]

at first to those very gentlemen who are so fond of the former.

We are often reproved by divines from the pulpits, on account of our ignorance in things sacred, and perhaps with justice enough. However, it is not very reasonable for them to expect, that common men should understand expressions which are never made use of in common life. No gentleman thinks it safe or prudent to send a servant with a message, without repeating it more than once, and endeavouring to put it into terms brought down to the capacity of the bearer: yet after all this care, it is frequent for servants to mistake, and sometimes to occasion misunderstandings among friends. Although the common domestics in some gentlemen's families have more opportunities of improving their minds than the ordinary sort of tradesmen.

It is usual for clergymen who are taxed with this learned defect, to quote Dr Tillotson, and other famous divines, in their defence; without considering the difference between elaborate discourses upon important occasions, delivered to princes or parliaments, written with a view of being made public, and a plain sermon intended for the middle or lower size of people. Neither do they seem to remember the many alterations, additions, and expungings, made by great authors in those treatises which they prepare for the public. Besides, that excellent prelate above-mentioned, was known to preach after a much more popular manner in the city congregations: and if in those parts of his works he be any where too obscure for the understandings of many who may be supposed to have been his hearers, it ought to be numbered among his omissions.

The fear of being thought pedants hath been of pernicious consequence to young divines. This hath wholly taken many of them off from their severer studies in the university, which they have exchanged for plays, poems, and pamphlets, in order to qualify them for tea-tables and coffee-houses. This they usually call "polite conversation; knowing the world; and reading men instead of books." These accomplishments, when applied to the pulpit, appear by a quaint, terse, florid style, rounded into periods and cadences, commonly without either propriety or meaning. I have

listen'd with my utmost attention for half an hour to an orator of this species, without being able to understand, much less to carry away one single sentence out of a whole sermon. Others, to shew that their studies have not been confined to sciences, or ancient authors, will talk in the style of a gaming ordinary, and White Friars,¹ when I suppose the hearers can be little edified by the terms of *palming*, *shuffling*, *biting*, *bamboozling*, and the like, if they have not been sometimes conversant among pick-pockets and sharpers. And truly, as they say, a man is known by his company, so it should seem that a man's company may be known by his manner of expressing himself, either in public assemblies, or private conversation.

It would be endless to run over the several defects of style among us; I shall therefore say nothing of the mean and paltry (which are usually attended by the fustian), much less of the slovenly or indecent. Two things I will just warn you against; the first is the frequency of flat unnecessary epithets, and the other is the folly of using old threadbare phrases, which will often make you go out of your way to find and apply them, are nauseous to rational hearers, and will seldom express your meaning as well as your own natural words.

Although, as I have already observed, our English tongue is too little cultivated in this kingdom; yet the faults are nine in ten owing to affectation, and not to the want of understanding. When a man's thoughts are clear, the properest words will generally offer themselves first, and his own judgment will direct him in what order to place them, so as they may be best understood. Where men err against this method, it is usually on purpose, and to shew their learning, their oratory, their politeness, or their knowledge of the world. In short, that simplicity without which no human performance can arrive to any great perfection, is nowhere more eminently useful than in this.

I have been considering that part of oratory which relates to the moving of the passions; this I observe is in esteem and practice among some church divines, as well as among all the preachers and hearers of the fanatic or enthusiastic

¹ See note on "Alsatia," p. 100. [T. S.]

strain. I will here deliver to you (perhaps with more freedom than prudence) my opinion upon the point.

The two great orators of Greece and Rome, Demosthenes and Cicero, though each of them a leader (or as the Greeks call it a demagogue) in a popular state, yet seem to differ in their practice upon this branch of their art ; the former who had to deal with a people of much more politeness, learning, and wit, laid the greatest weight of his oratory upon the strength of his arguments, offered to their understanding and reason : whereas Tully considered the dispositions of a sincere, more ignorant, and less mercurial nation, by dwelling almost entirely on the pathetic part.

But the principal thing to be remembered is, that the constant design of both these orators in all their speeches, was to drive some one particular point, either the condemnation or acquittal of an accused person, a persuasive to war, the enforcing of a law, and the like ; which was determined upon the spot, according as the orators on either side prevailed. And here it was often found of absolute necessity to inflame or cool the passions of the audience, especially at Rome where Tully spoke, and with whose writings young divines (I mean those among them who read old authors) are more conversant than with those of Demosthenes, who by many degrees excelled the other at least as an orator. But I do not see how this talent of moving the passions can be of any great use toward directing Christian men in the conduct of their lives, at least in these northern climates, where I am confident the strongest eloquence of that kind will leave few impressions upon any of our spirits deep enough to last till the next morning, or rather to the next meal.¹

But what hath chiefly put me out of conceit with this moving manner of preaching, is the frequent disappointment it meets with. I know a gentleman, who made it a rule in reading, to skip over all sentences where he spied a note of admiration at the end. I believe those preachers who abound in *epiphonemas*,² if they look about them, would find

¹ Swift's own sermons rarely appealed to the emotions ; they were, in his own phrase, political pamphlets, and aimed at convincing the reason. [T. S.]

² *Epiphonema* is a figure in rhetoric, signifying a sententious kind of exclamation. [S.]

one part of their congregation out of countenance, and the other asleep, except perhaps an old female beggar or two in the aisles, who (if they be sincere) may probably groan at the sound.

Nor is it a wonder, that this expedient should so often miscarry, which requires so much art and genius to arrive at any perfection in it, as any man will find, much sooner than learn by consulting Cicero himself.

I therefore entreat you to make use of this faculty (if you ever be so unfortunate as to think you have it) as seldom, and with as much caution as you can, else I may probably have occasion to say of you as a great person said of another upon this very subject. A lady asked him coming out of church, whether it were not a very moving discourse? "Yes," said he, "I was extremely sorry, for the man is my friend."

If in company you offer something for a jest, and nobody second you in your own laughter, nor seems to relish what you said, you may condemn their taste, if you please, and appeal to better judgments; but in the meantime, it must be agreed you make a very indifferent figure; and it is at least equally ridiculous to be disappointed in endeavouring to make other folks grieve, as to make them laugh.

A plain convincing reason may possibly operate upon the mind both of a learned and ignorant hearer as long as they live, and will edify a thousand times more than the art of wetting the handkerchiefs of a whole congregation, if you were sure to attain it.

If your arguments be strong, in God's name offer them in as moving a manner as the nature of the subject will properly admit, wherein reason and good advice will be your safest guides; but beware of letting the pathetic part swallow up the rational: For I suppose, philosophers have long agreed, that passion should never prevail over reason.

As I take it, the two principal branches of preaching are first to tell the people what is their duty, and then to convince them that it is so. The topics for both these, we know, are brought from Scripture and reason. Upon this first, I wish it were often practised to instruct the hearers in the limits, extent, and compass of every duty, which requires a good deal of skill and judgment: the other branch is, I

think, not so difficult. But what I would offer them both, is this ; that it seems to be in the power of a reasonable clergyman, if he will be at the pains, to make the most ignorant man comprehend what is his duty, and to convince him by argument drawn to the level of his understanding, that he ought to perform it.

But I must remember that my design in this paper was not so much to instruct you in your business either as a clergyman or a preacher, as to warn you against some mistakes which are obvious to the generality of mankind as well as to me ; and we who are hearers, may be allowed to have some opportunities in the quality of being standers-by. Only perhaps I may now again transgress by desiring you to express the heads of your divisions in as few and clear words as you possibly can, otherwise, I and many thousand others will never be able to retain them, nor consequently to carry away a syllable of the sermon.

I shall now mention a particular wherein your whole body will be certainly against me, and the laity almost to a man on my side. However it came about, I cannot get over the prejudice of taking some little offence at the clergy for perpetually reading their sermons ;¹ perhaps my frequent hearing of foreigners, who never made use of notes, may have added to my disgust. And I cannot but think, that whatever is read, differs as much from what is repeated without book, as a copy does from an original. At the same time, I am highly sensible what an extreme difficulty it would be upon you to alter this method, and that, in such a case, your sermons would be much less valuable than they are, for want of time to improve and correct them. I would therefore gladly come to a compromise with you in this matter. I knew a clergyman of some distinction, who appeared to deliver his sermon without looking into his notes, which when I complimented him upon, he assured me he could not repeat six lines ; but his method was to write the whole sermon in a large plain hand, with all the forms of margin, paragraph, marked page, and the like ;

¹ "The custom of reading sermons," notes Scott, "seems originally to have arisen in opposition to the practice of Dissenters, many of whom affected to trust to their inspiration in their *extempore* harangues." [T. S.]

then on Sunday morning he took care to run it over five or six times, which he could do in an hour; and when he deliver'd it, by pretending to turn his face from one side to the other, he would (in his own expression) pick up the lines, and cheat his people by making them believe he had it all by heart. He farther added, that whenever he happened by neglect to omit any of these circumstances, the vogue of the parish was, "Our doctor gave us but an indifferent sermon to-day." Now among us, many clergymen act too directly contrary to this method, that from a habit of saving time and paper, which they acquired at the University, they write in so diminutive a manner, with such frequent blots and interlineations, that they are hardly able to go on without perpetual hesitations or extemporary expletives: And I desire to know what can be more inexcusable, than to see a divine and a scholar, at a loss in reading his own compositions, which it is supposed he has been preparing with much pains and thought for the instruction of his people? The want of a little more care in this article, is the cause of much ungraceful behaviour. You will observe some clergymen with their heads held down from the beginning to the end, within an inch of the cushion, to read what is hardly legible; which, besides the untoward manner, hinders them from making the best advantage of their voice: others again have a trick of popping up and down every moment from their paper to the audience, like an idle school-boy on a repetition day.

Let me entreat you, therefore, to add one half-crown a year to the article of paper; to transcribe your sermons in as large and plain a manner as you can, and either make no interlineations, or change the whole leaf; for we your hearers would rather you should be less correct than perpetually stammering, which I take to be one of the worst solecisms in rhetoric: And lastly, read your sermon once or twice for a few days before you preach it: to which you will probably answer some years hence, "that it was but just finished when the last bell rang to church:" and I shall readily believe, but not excuse you.

I cannot forbear warning you in the most earnest manner against endeavouring at wit in your sermons, because by the strictest computation, it is very near a million to one that you have none; and because too many of your calling have

consequently made themselves everlastingly ridiculous by attempting it. I remember several young men in this town, who could never leave the pulpit under half a dozen conceits ; and this faculty adhered to those gentlemen a longer or shorter time exactly in proportion to their several degrees of dulness : accordingly, I am told that some of them retain it to this day. I heartily wish the brood were at an end.

Before you enter into the common insufferable cant of taking all occasions to disparage the heathen philosophers, I hope you will differ from some of your brethren, by first enquiring what those philosophers can say for themselves. The system of morality to be gathered out of the writings or sayings of those ancient sages, falls undoubtedly very short of that delivered in the Gospel, and wants besides, the divine sanction which our Saviour gave to His. Whatever is further related by the evangelists, contains chiefly, matters of fact, and consequently of faith, such as the birth of Christ, His being the Messiah, His Miracles, His death, resurrection, and ascension. None of which can properly come under the appellation of human wisdom, being intended only to make us wise unto salvation. And therefore in this point nothing can justly be laid to the charge of the philosophers further than that they were ignorant of certain facts that happened long after their death. But I am deceived, if a better comment could be anywhere collected, upon the moral part of the Gospel, than from the writings of those excellent men ; even that divine precept of loving our enemies, is at large insisted on by Plato, who puts it, as I remember, into the mouth of Socrates.¹ And as to the reproach of heathenism, I doubt they had less of it than the corrupted Jews in whose time they lived. For it is a gross piece of ignorance among us to conceive that in those polite and learned ages, even persons of any tolerable education, much less the wisest philosophers did acknowledge or worship any more than one almighty power, under several denominations, to whom they allowed all those attributes we ascribe to the Divinity : and as I take it, human comprehension reacheth no further : neither did our Saviour think it necessary to explain to us the nature of

¹ This is in the "Crito" of Plato, where Socrates says it is wrong to do harm to our enemies. [T. S.]

God, because I suppose it would be impossible without bestowing on us other faculties than we possess at present. But the true misery of the heathen world appears to be what I before mentioned, the want of a Divine Sanction, without which the dictates of the philosophers failed in the point of authority, and consequently the bulk of mankind lay indeed under a great load of ignorance even in the article of morality, but the philosophers themselves did not. Take the matter in this light, it will afford field enough for a divine to enlarge on, by shewing the advantages which the Christian world has over the heathen, and the absolute necessity of Divine Revelation, to make the knowledge of the true God, and the practice of virtue more universal in the world.

I am not ignorant how much I differ in this opinion from some ancient fathers in the Church, who arguing against the heathens, made it a principal topic to decry their philosophy as much as they could : which, I hope, is not altogether our present case. Besides, it is to be considered, that those fathers lived in the decline of literature ; and in my judgment (who should be unwilling to give the least offence) appear to be rather most excellent, holy persons, than of transcendent genius and learning. Their genuine writings (for many of them have extremely suffered by spurious editions) are of admirable use for confirming the truth of ancient doctrines and discipline, by shewing the state and practice of the primitive church. But among such of them as have fallen in my way, I do not remember any whose manner of arguing or exhorting I could heartily recommend to the imitation of a young divine when he is to speak from the pulpit. Perhaps I judge too hastily ; there being several of them in whose writings I have made very little progress, and in others none at all. For I perused only such as were recommended to me, at a time when I had more leisure and a better disposition to read, than have since fallen to my share.¹

To return then to the heathen philosophers, I hope you

¹ Swift must refer here to the years he spent at Moor Park, in the house of Sir William Temple. The "Tale of a Tub," however, shows that he had not idled his time, and that his acquaintance with the writings of the fathers was fairly intimate. [T. S.]

will not only give them quarter, but make their works a considerable part of your study: To these I will venture to add the principal orators and historians, and perhaps a few of the poets: by the reading of which, you will soon discover your mind and thoughts to be enlarged, your imagination extended and refined, your judgment directed, your admiration lessened, and your fortitude increased; all which advantages must needs be of excellent use to a divine, whose duty it is to preach and practise the contempt of human things.

I would say something concerning quotations, wherein I think you cannot be too sparing, except from Scripture, and the primitive writers of the Church. As to the former, when you offer a text as a proof of an illustration, we your hearers expect to be fairly used, and sometimes think we have reason to complain, especially of you younger divines, which makes us fear that some of you conceive you have no more to do than to turn over a concordance, and there having found the principal word, introduce as much of the verse as will serve your turn, though in reality it makes nothing for you. I do not altogether disapprove the manner of interweaving texts of scripture through the style of your sermons, wherein however, I have sometimes observed great instances of indiscretion and impropriety, against which I therefore venture to give you a caution.

As to quotations from ancient fathers, I think they are best brought in to confirm some opinion controverted by those who differ from us: in other cases we give you full power to adopt the sentence for your own, rather than tell us, "as St. Austin excellently observes." But to mention modern writers by name, or use the phrase of "a late excellent prelate of our Church," and the like, is altogether intolerable, and for what reason I know not, makes every rational hearer ashamed. Of no better a stamp is your "heathen philosopher" and "famous poet," and "Roman historian," at least in common congregations, who will rather believe you on your own word, than on that of Plato or Homer.

I have lived to see Greek and Latin almost entirely driven out of the pulpit, for which I am heartily glad. The frequent use of the latter was certainly a remnant of Popery

which never admitted Scripture in the vulgar language ; and I wonder, that practice was never accordingly objected to us by the fanatics.

The mention of quotations puts me in mind of commonplace books, which have been long in use by industrious young divines, and I hear do still continue so. I know they are very beneficial to lawyers and physicians, because they are collections of facts or cases, whereupon a great part of their several faculties depend ; of these I have seen several, but never yet any written by a clergyman ; only from what I am informed, they generally are extracts of theological and moral sentences drawn from ecclesiastical and other authors, reduced under proper heads, usually begun, and perhaps finished, while the collectors were young in the church, as being intended for materials or nurseries to stock future sermons. You will observe the wise editors of ancient authors, when they meet a sentence worthy of being distinguished, take special care to have the first word printed in capital letters, that you may not overlook it : Such, for example, as the INCONSTANCY of FORTUNE, the GOODNESS of PEACE, the EXCELLENCY of WISDOM, the CERTAINTY of DEATH : that PROSPERITY makes men INSOLENT, and ADVERSITY HUMBLE ; and the like eternal truths, which every ploughman knows well enough before Aristotle or Plato were born.¹ If theological commonplace books be no better filled, I think they had better be laid aside, and I could wish that men of tolerable intellectuals would rather trust their own natural reason, improved by a general conversation with books, to enlarge on points which they are supposed already to understand. If a rational man reads an excellent author with just application, he shall find himself extremely improved, and perhaps insensibly led to imitate that author's perfections, although in a little time he should not remember one word in the book, nor even the subject it handled : for books give the same turn to our thoughts and way of reasoning, that good and ill company do to our behaviour and conversation ; without either loading our memories, or making us even sensible of the change. And particularly I have observed in preaching, that no men succeed better than

¹ Thus in first edition. Scott and Hawkesworth have : " though he never heard of Aristotle or Plato." [T. S.]

those who trust entirely to the stock or fund of their own reason, advanced indeed, but not overlaid by commerce with books: Whoever only reads in order to transcribe wise and shining remarks, without entering into the genius and spirit of the author, as it is probable he will make no very judicious extract, so he will be apt to trust to that collection in all his compositions, and be misled out of the regular way of thinking, in order to introduce those materials, which he has been at the pains to gather: and the product of all this will be found a manifest incoherent piece of patchwork.

Some gentlemen abounding in their university erudition, are apt to fill their sermons with philosophical terms and notions of the metaphysical or abstracted kind, which generally have one advantage, to be equally understood by the wise, the vulgar, and the preacher himself. I have been better entertained, and more informed by a chapter¹ in the "Pilgrim's Progress," than by a long discourse upon the will and the intellect, and simple or complex ideas. Others again, are fond of dilating on matter and motion, talk of the fortuitous concourse of atoms, of theories, and phenomena; directly against the advice of St Paul, who yet appears to have been conversant enough in those kinds of studies.

I do not find that you are anywhere directed in the canons or articles, to attempt explaining the mysteries of the Christian religion. And indeed since Providence intended there should be mysteries, I do not see how it can be agreeable to piety, orthodoxy or good sense, to go about such a work. For, to me there seems to be a manifest dilemma in the case: if you explain them, they are mysteries no longer; if you fail, you have laboured to no purpose. What I should think most reasonable and safe for you to do upon this occasion is, upon solemn days to deliver the doctrine as the Church holds it, and confirm it by Scripture. For my part, having considered the matter impartially, I can see no great reason which those gentlemen you call the freethinkers can have for their clamour against religious mysteries; since it is plain, they were not invented by the clergy, to whom they bring no profit, nor acquire any honour. For every clergy-

¹ Thus in first edition. Scott and Hawkesworth have "a few pages" instead of "a chapter." [T. S.]

man is ready either to tell us the utmost he knows, or to confess that he does not understand them; neither is it strange that there should be mysteries in divinity as well as in the commonest operations of nature.

And here I am at a loss what to say upon the frequent custom of preaching against atheism, deism, freethinking, and the like, as young divines are particularly fond of doing especially when they exercise their talent in churches frequented by persons of quality, which as it is but an ill compliment to the audience; so I am under some doubt whether it answers the end.

Because persons under those imputations are generally no great frequenters of churches, and so the congregation is but little edified for the sake of three or four fools who are past grace. Neither do I think it any part of prudence to perplex the minds of well-disposed people with doubts, which probably would never have otherwise come into their heads. But I am of opinion, and dare be positive in it, that not one in an hundred of those who pretend to be freethinkers, are really so in their hearts. For there is one observation which I never knew to fail, and I desire you will examine it in the course of your life, that no gentleman of a liberal education, and regular in his morals, did ever profess himself a freethinker: where then are these kind of people to be found? Among the worst part of the soldiery made up of pages, younger brothers of obscure families, and others of desperate fortunes; or else among idle town fops, and now and then a drunken 'squire of the country. Therefore nothing can be plainer, than that ignorance and vice are two ingredients absolutely necessary in the composition of those you generally call freethinkers, who in propriety of speech, are no thinkers at all. And since I am in the way of it, pray consider one thing farther: as young as you are, you cannot but have already observed, what a violent run there is among too many weak people against university education. Be firmly assured, that the whole cry is made up by those who were either never sent to a college; or through their irregularities and stupidity never made the least improvement while they were there. I have at least ¹ forty of the latter sort now in my

¹ Scott and Hawkesworth print "above forty." [T. S.]

eye ; several of them in this town, whose learning, manners, temperance, probity, good-nature, and politics, are all of a piece. Others of them in the country, oppressing their tenants, tyrannizing over the neighbourhood, cheating the vicar, talking nonsense, and getting drunk at the sessions. It is from such seminaries as these, that the world is provided with the several tribes and denominations of freethinkers, who, in my judgment, are not to be reformed by arguments offered to prove the truth of the Christian religion, because reasoning will never make a man correct an ill opinion, which by reasoning he never acquired : for in the course of things, men always grow vicious before they become unbelievers ; but if you would once convince the town or country profligate, by topics drawn from the view of their own quiet, reputation, health, and advantage, their infidelity would soon drop off : This I confess is no easy task, because it is almost in a literal sense, to fight with beasts. Now, to make it clear, that we are to look for no other original of this infidelity, whereof divines so much complain, it is allowed on all hands, that the people of England are more corrupt in their morals than any other nation at this day under the sun : and this corruption is manifestly owing to other causes, both numerous and obvious, much more than to the publication of irreligious books, which indeed are but the consequence of the former. For all the writers against Christianity since the Revolution have been of the lowest rank among men in regard to literature, wit, and good sense, and upon that account wholly unqualified to propagate heresies, unless among a people already abandoned.

In an age where everything disliked by those who think with the majority is called disaffection, it may perhaps be ill interpreted, when I venture to tell you that this universal depravation of manners is owing to the perpetual bandying of factions among us for thirty years past ; when without weighing the motives of justice, law, conscience, or honour, every man adjusts his principles to those of the party he hath chosen, and among whom he may best find his own account : But by reason of our frequent vicissitudes, men who were impatient of being out of play, have been forced to recant, or at least to reconcile their former tenets with every new system of administration. Add to this, that the old funda-

mental custom of annual parliaments being wholly laid aside, and elections growing chargeable, since gentlemen found that their country seats brought them in less than a seat in the House, the voters, that is to say, the bulk of the common people have been universally seduced into bribery, perjury, drunkenness, malice, and slanders.

Not to be further tedious, or rather invidious, these are a few among other causes which have contributed to the ruin of our morals, and consequently to the contempt of religion : For imagine to yourself, if you please, a landed youth, whom his mother would never suffer to look into a book for fear of spoiling his eyes, got into parliament, and observing all enemies to the clergy heard with the utmost applause, what notions he must imbibe ; how readily he will join in the cry ; what an esteem he will conceive of himself ; and what a contempt he must entertain, not only for his vicar at home, but for the whole order.

I therefore again conclude, that the trade of infidelity hath been taken up only for an expedient to keep in countenance that universal corruption of morals, which many other causes first contributed to introduce and to cultivate. And thus, Mr Hobbes' saying upon reason may be much more properly applied to religion : that, " if religion will be against a man, a man will be against religion." Though after all, I have heard a profligate offer much stronger arguments against paying his debts, than ever he was known to do against Christianity ; indeed the reason was, because in that juncture he happened to be closer pressed by the bailiff than the parson.

Ignorance may perhaps be the mother of superstition ; but experience hath not proved it to be so of devotion : for Christianity always made the most easy and quickest progress in civilized countries. I mention this because it is affirmed that the clergy are in most credit where ignorance prevails (and surely this kingdom would be called the paradise of clergymen if that opinion were true) for which they instance England in the times of Popery. But whoever knows anything of three or four centuries before the Reformation, will find the little learning then stirring was more equally divided between the English clergy and laity than it is at present. There were several famous lawyers in that period, whose

writings are still in the highest repute, and some historians and poets who were not of the Church.¹ Whereas now-a-days our education is so corrupted, that you will hardly find a young person of quality with the least tincture of knowledge, at the same time that many of the clergy were never more learned, or so scurvily treated. Here among us, at least, a man of letters out of the three professions, is almost a prodigy. And those few who have preserved any rudiments of learning are (except perhaps one or two smatterers) the clergy's friends to a man: and I dare appeal to any clergyman in this kingdom, whether the greatest dunce in the parish be not always the most proud, wicked, fraudulent, and intractable of his flock.

I think the clergy have almost given over perplexing themselves and their hearers with abstruse points of Predestination, Election, and the like; at least it is time they should; and therefore I shall not trouble you further upon this head.

I have now said all I could think convenient with relation to your conduct in the pulpit: your behaviour in life² is another scene, upon which I shall readily offer you my thoughts, if you appear to desire them from me by your approbation of what I have here written; if not, I have already troubled you too much.

I am, Sir,

Your Affectionate

Friend and Servant

A. B.

January 9th.

1719-20.

¹ What Swift calls learning was, in his day, the property, so to speak, of professional men, such as divines, lawyers, and university teachers. The common man was too poor or too much taxed to acquire it; the aristocrat often too lazy or too fond of pleasure-seeking to bother about it. The Pre-Reformation days, to which Swift refers, could boast such men as Fabyan, Hall, Chaucer, Gower, and Caxton, as well as Lord Berners, Sir Thomas More, and Lydgate, who were not, in any sense, professional men. [T. S.]

² Scott and Hawkesworth print "your behaviour in the world." The above is the reading of the first edition. [T. S.]